

[Personal History of Rev. Wilfred Ouellette]

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Maine [1938-39?]

Maine

Living Lore

Old Town - 1

PERSONAL HISTORY OF REV. WILFRED OUELLETTE, FRENCH CANADIAN

Father Ouellette is nearly six feet tall, dark, and very agreeable. He wears eye glasses and has dark wavy hair. Is about 45 years old perhaps. His face was perfectly expressionless at first, but as he talked about the French his face lighted up with interest and enthusiasm. I certainly enjoyed the interview which furnished a decided contrast to others because of the man's poise, precise speech, and wide knowledge.

As I was leaving I had to call my 4 year old boy who was much interested in a safe door.

Father Ouellette laughed. "My boy," he said, "I hope you aren't considering a career in safe-breaking."

The priest allowed me to take several newspapers, a hand illustrated book of French and Canadian folk songs, and a book of biographies of outstanding French Canadian persons in New England. These are all printed in French.

He is a very high minded man and a very interesting talker.

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THE LIFE OF REV. WILFRED OUELLETTE, FRENCH CANADIAN

(As told by himself to Robert F. Grady) Fr. Ouellette: "I'm afraid I can't tell you who the first pastor was here. Our records go back some distance, but they don't go back that far. Sometimes people who wish to apply for pensions come here to get their birth records when they can't procure them at the city hall. Bapst, for whom the John Bapst school in Bangor was named, was one of the early priests here. Perhaps some of the older residents could recall the name of the first pastor. I think he was Irish.

"Many of the French Canadians who came to Maine sixty or seventy years ago were unable to speak English, but they could read and write French. If any were uneducated it was not the fault of the schools - they were very good. Sometimes, however villages or farms were so isolated that it was difficult for children to reach the schools and that fact accounted for some illiteracy.

"The farms in Maine usually run parallel to the road, but in Canada they were laid out like this: " (?)

"They arranged their farms that way so that their settlement would be more compact. They would be near each other and able to help one another readily. The houses were near the road, vegetables and grain for home use were planted here (between the house and the wood), and out in the back was the woods where they obtained firewood. That arrangement of farms may have been influenced by the dangers of attack from hostile Indians or wild animals, but chiefly, I think, it was prompted by a desire for companionship."

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"There is much in this outline that you will find fully treated in this book by Bracq. You do not speak or understand French? Ah, that is too bad. [Bracq?] lived among the people, he spoke their language, and he knew their customs. He loved them. Only in that way

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can one write understandingly of them. The French here are unfortunately losing many of their racial characteristics. We teach French over here (St. Joseph's Parochial School) and nearly all of them can speak the language, but many of them, especially those who attend the public schools, can't read or write it. America is the great melting pot. All races are poured into it to emerge as one." R.G. "Some writers claim that the French resist that melting process more than those of other nationalities. Do you think that is true? Fr. Ouellette: "No, but I wish it were. We are loyal to the country in which we claim citizenship, but we are also loyal to ourselves and our traditions. Consider the question from another point of view. Supposing that you were a member of a small group of Americans who emigrated to a foreign land and settled on foreign soil. You would see yourselves threatened with extinction so far as your racial identity was concerned. Your little group would represent a small island that was in danger of being engulfed in the sea of a different racial culture. Would you not make an effort to preserve your racial traits? I think you would.

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"Quebec is predominantly French - almost as much so as France itself - but we feel that what was the old province of Acadia is almost a land apart. You have read the poem Evangeline? The incidents related in that poem are in the main true. Acadia came under the domination of the English at that time and ever since, that part of Canada has remained, in contrast to the province of Quebec, the home of mixed racial groups.

The French newspapers published in Maine were never large in size. Some had only four pages and some had eight or ten. These publishing companies were not regarded as money making concerns. The people who started them knew that they would lose money. They were people who obtained an income from some other source: they were lawyers, doctors, business men. They did it only because of their patriotism and their love for things French. They wished to help perpetuate the language and customs of the race. Here is the Bangor News. It's editors have their ideals, of course, but it is strictly a commercial proposition. It can be bought and sold. These French newspapers were not regarded in

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that light. They were nearer to the hearts of their owners than to their pocketbooks. Wait, I will get one for you.”

(Fr. Ouellette jumped up here and ran up a stairway in the hall and returned shortly with two papers.)

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“Ah, here is one published in Montreal. Le Devoir. Do you know what that means? ‘The Duty’. This contains, as you see, ten pages and is equal in size to the ordinary paper. It derives its income from advertisements and from subscriptions. This one is Le Messager and it is representative of the French papers published in Maine. On the first page is an account of the President's message to Congress, an account of the opening session of the Maine Legislature, some war news from China, a dispatch from Berlin, and some general news items. On the back pages there is news of a local and personal nature. There are some advertisements, and in general there are features that might be found in any American paper. Here is the installment of a serial story, and much of this page is devoted to editorials. Ah, those editorials! Here are many advertisements of local (Lewiston and Auburn) concerns, and this is the sport page. These papers are printed entirely in French.

“Trade relations between Maine and Canada - that is out of my sphere. Literature, Art, the Theater. We are interested in all of these things, but I do not think you will find many French persons who occupy outstanding positions in those professions in Maine. Just a minute, I have a book of biographies that I will get for you.”

(Again Father Ouellette ran upstairs this time to return with a book printed in French.)

“This book contains brief biographies of prominent French people, not only of Maine, but of New England as well.

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"Music. Yes the French are distinctly musical. They have their old folk songs too. I have a book - the first of a series that will be published - that contains many of the old folk songs of Canada. I will get it for you. (This time the priest went out to a music room on the same floor and returned with the book mentioned.)

"This book was sent to me by the author whose name and picture appears on this page. The title is Chantez La Bonne Chanson. La Feuille d'Erable - the maple leaf is the emblem of Canada. Evangeline, [Les?] Cloches du Hameau - that is very pretty. Here is a picture of the bridge at Quebec. La Soupe aux Pois. Of course you know the meaning of that. It means pea soup. That was almost a national dish. Many of these songs are Canadian, but some are of France. Pot Pourri: that means a little of everything. [Les?] Crepes. Ah, you can tell what that means by the picture. Pancakes. That dish, too, is very well liked. You must remember to write something about maple sugar. The making of that is an important industry in Canada. You may take both of these books if you wish - and the newspapers. I won't need them for a time. You may keep them as long as you require them.

"Cuisine. Yes that should be taken up. Cooking is an art in France and the French Canadians originally came from that country. Many of the French in Canada were, of course, very poor and couldn't afford choice dishes. They ate plain food, well cooked. I can't think of any dish that became so identified with the French people in Canada as pea soup. They liked meat pies.

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"Religion, Divorce. Divorce was unknown to these people. The people were urged to remain true to one mate. Sometimes there was a separation, but no divorce. Holiday celebrations. Christmas and New Years were their main holidays. Epiphany, which is tomorrow (January 6), was also observed. Much of this you will find in Bracq's book.

"Superstition. Now there is something that will have to be handled very carefully. The French are sensitive and they would resent anything that would seem to ridicule their

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beliefs. Yes, it is necessary to be careful there. They had their stories and tales of ghosts and witches, but they were told with the tongue in the cheek. Some one might take a pack of cards and tell fortunes with them, but it was only for amusement. We had a fortune teller's booth at one of our entertainments a few years ago. She told fortunes with the cards, but nobody took it seriously. note Beliefs - ?

"The evil eye - I don't know what that means."

(It was necessary to bring the interview to a close soon after this because of the duties of the priest required that he should be in the church at 6.30 and it was nearly that when I left.)